(CAUTION! Potential SPOILER in this review for those who don’t know the film’s “gimmick”)

In S&MAN (now on DVD and Blu-ray under Magnolia Home Entertainment’s Magnet banner), J.T. Petty—the writer/director of SOFT FOR DIGGING, MIMIC: SENTINEL and THE BURROWERS—examines underground horror, voyeurism and the connections between sex and violence in the genre. This interesting, albeit uneven, mix of fact and fiction is presented as a documentary, but combines actual interviews with real people and professionals with a fabricated storyline involving a made-up director whose snuff films may be the real deal.

Petty narrates and appears in the “documentary,” and he isn’t solely the director and interviewer, but a character as well; more on that later. Starting off with a clip from Michael Powell’s classic PEEPING TOM, Petty comments that this project actually began as an account of a peeper who lived in his hometown of Washington, DC. However, when his subject declined to be filmed, Petty decided to veer his docu into a not altogether different direction and take a look into the world of underworld horror and its controversial, and often unsettling, association with voyeurism.

The talking heads whom Petty chats with include Carol Clover, author of MEN, WOMEN AND CHAIN SAWS: GENDER IN THE MODERN HORROR FILM; Bill Zebub, director of JESUS CHRIST: SERIAL RAPIST and other low-budget exploitation/fetish fare (he has a fondness for big breasts and the crucifixion, debasement and rape of women); Fred Vogel, head of Toetag Pictures, who works with his fiancée on voyeuristic films featuring murder, sex, regurgitation and various bodily functions; scream queen Debbie D, who stars in these sorts of films and has no qualms about shedding her clothes or being “shot” in her privates; a sexologist and her forensic psychologist husband; and, most importantly, blue-eyed and cherubic-looking Eric

Rost, the creator and director of the S&MAN video series that focuses on the stalking and killing of unsuspecting females.

What begins as an exploration of snuff films and why men like to make and watch movies of women being tortured and killed (as Zebub puts it, “I shoot it so perverts give me money”) turns into an investigation into whether Rost’s snuff movies are real or not. And this is where S&MAN lost me. Petty’s interviews with Zebub, Vogel and the real people and professionals involved in the underground horror scene are the best parts of the movie. While these conversations don’t exactly break any new ground, it’s curious and compelling (and sometimes amusing—especially coming from the candid but not always lucid Zebub, who is never without a beer in his hand while offering up his thoughts) to listen to the interviewees debate and talk about such subject matters as people’s attraction to sex and violence, why many of the directors (and fans) of these films that revel in demeaning and killing women are men who aren’t successful with the opposite sex and what lies at the foundation of people’s fascination with voyeurism. (To be fair and offer both sides of the sex equation, Debbie D—who provides insightful opinions from the female perspective—and other actresses actually enjoy—or have no issues with—these sorts of flicks, and some have even contacted the filmmakers to star and be killed in their films). These chats are equal parts engaging, intellectual and revealing.

But (and here’s the SPOILER) Petty steers the film in the wrong direction, intercutting these absorbing dialogues with the obvious fictional Rost storyline. Erik Marcisak “plays” Eric Rost in the movie, and while he is very good in the role and creepily effective, his storyline derails the movie. It’s apparent where the “Are his S&MAN movies real or not?” arc is heading, and it’s so evidently artificial that it takes away from S&MAN’s truthful elements and diminishes its dissection of voyeurism and masochism in the underground horror realm. It’s not that Rost’s scenes are awful (as I said, Marcisak does a commendable job of creating the character), but they’re unnecessary. And although Rost is a disturbed person, he isn’t an imposing or frightening figure. It’s like the Son of Sam vs. David Berkowitz—one is an unknown, mythic, larger-than-life terror, the other is an ordinary-looking, unimpressive (but screwed up) human being. I get where Petty is trying to go with Rost, but it strikes me as a wrong move, and the S&MAN movies lack the force and strength of similar scenes in such fictional films as 8MM and A SERBIAN FILM.

The DVD and Blu-ray come with two commentaries, one of which I highly recommend, the other which I highly encourage you to skip. The latter features Petty and “Rost” in character, and the conceit is that Eric is using this track (after a legal settlement) to clear up some things. Basically, it’s 80-plus minutes of Eric bitching about how Petty makes him and the subjects look dumb, how Petty stole ideas from him, other accusations and beefs over invasion of privacy and so on. It gets old and repetitive real quick.

The other commentary, however, is a must-listen for fans of the film. Petty and Marcisak (as themselves) talk about the creation of the film, the S&MAN movies and Eric Rost. It’s a fascinating conversation that covers what’s true and untrue in the film, who’s for real and who’s not and much more. I particularly enjoyed Marcisak disclosing that his two inspirations for Eric Rost were Hannibal Lecter and Ricky Gervais’ character from THE OFFICE. Marcisak also recalls how he and Petty first met, and the duo brings up Debbie D’s homemade scream queen movies, how they got permission to “stalk” and tape actresses and discuss the uncomfortable (and rather revealing) scene in which Zebub (apparently intoxicated) takes endless hours to shoot a scene involving a poor actress lying face down and naked on a barroom floor.

Among the other extras are the complete “S&MAN Episode 11.” It’s nearly 30 minutes, and unless you’re a *real* voyeur, you’ll probably want to skip this footage of Rost following “Carlina” at her job and with her fiancé, and invading her home. There’s a collection of deleted and extended scenes, which aren’t remarkable, and feature Zebub and KILL THE SCREAM QUEEN, Eric talking about peeping and stalking, plus extended moments from the diner sequence. Also included is a sequence from ToeTag’s AUGUST UNDERGROUND’S MORDUM, which is boring, bumbling and contains actual arm-cutting and gross shots of rancid food. Finally, there are some Petty-directed “film trailers” for S&MAN episodes and a real trailer for this movie.

An original and thought-provoking examination of underground horror and why it fascinates some and repulses others, S&MAN looks at filmmaking vs. voyeurism and presents some interesting and enlightening opinions and ideas. While it unfortunately loses its way in the “What’s real or fake?” gimmick, there’s still a good deal here to mull over for horror fans who enjoy analyzing the genre and considering what draws them in, disgusts and offends them—and, most importantly, why.

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